

## THE TOURIST by Henry Knight Lozano

The minute before, Rodrey was sat alone on a bench toward the river's edge. There were distant shouts but he only half-heard them. His mind adrift, while his eyes lingered upon a flash of colour. A mallard shot across from the bank – a blur of teal and grey – before it pulled away. The skim of its wings setting off a ripple in the sluggish brown water of the Dart.

The kind of view the tourists loved, as perfect a glimpse of Totnes as you could ask. Market day and the bridge was full: those elderly couples and young families with cameras ready might even have captured the duck if they were lucky. And if they weren't, they might have caught him, sitting on Vire Island, a ghost in the summer sun.

Rodrey had seen that mallard too many times. When you grew up here the river stopped changing.

But two weeks ago, he'd met Haruko on the bench. After a long shift in the kitchen, his hands cracked from the washer. He'd been re-reading one of the books his dad left behind. It was an old one. About a kid who had been kicked out of school too.

Then there was a girl. Out of the corner of his eye, a bob of black hair. The pale curve of her face.

"You know, in Japan, that is sometimes called, *Please, Catch Me in the Rye.*"

He frowned, trying to make heads or tails of that. Of what it said about the story.

"Really?"

She nodded. "Do you like it?"

He wasn't used to discussing books. But told her he *did*, even if the main character drove him mad.

Haruko was studying at the language school, but her English was good. Better than good. She used words like *disorienting*, which he found disorienting enough.

She had a Zoom planned with family, but they agreed to meet up later in a pub garden. He didn't expect her to turn up; but she did, wearing a navy-blue dress that matched her glasses. Over cider, they talked about the book. Holden Caulfield and the disappearing ducks of Central Park and what else might have changed in translation.

She wanted to know about him. His life. He'd been embarrassed. How small it was. How little he had seen, done. She was eighteen, too, but had been to so many places. He'd never lived anywhere but.

Then Haruko asked him to show her. They wandered the Narrows. In a rainstorm, he showed her the Leechwell, recalling a story his father told him. How centuries ago, people sick and suffering travelled there because they believed it had healing waters. Haruko lent down. Put her fingers into its slow trickle.

One day they followed the paths through Sharpham woods. The sloping forest he knew well when he was younger (when he imagined it full of wild beasts, dragons and monkeys), but hadn't explored in years. In places the path ran slick with mud. She took his hand. Didn't let go.

Rodrey checked his watch. Work in an hour. Another shift, like the last. Till then he had nowhere to be. No book either; only the bench and the river. The mallard had vanished.

Haruko was flying somewhere over Asia. Flying toward the lights of Tokyo, where she would be going to university in September. He had seen the city in films. Bright towers and high-speed trains. Literally a world away from the sleepy riverside.

"You have to visit," she'd said to him in the quiet of her small bedroom in the language school. He'd nodded. Of course.

Rodrey closed his eyes. Numb.

He knew he would never see her again.

Suddenly the shouting got louder. Boys yelling. Hard to tell if it was play or not.

He turned and saw them. A red-headed kid racing onto the bridge from the town side; two older boys chasing after. The lad must have been in the road because the bridge's narrow pavement looked two-deep in spots. Tourists lining the parapet, selfie-cameras raised like offerings to a sky god.

His gaze jumped to the Bridgetown side and his stomach knotted. A double-decker bus was bundling a little fast onto the bridge. The red-headed kid was looking over his shoulder. Rodrey stood, opened his mouth. The bus horn rang out.

At the last the kid turned.

The next happened with the suddenness of a punch. The kid trampled onto the pavement, crashing into a cluster of tourists. A grey-haired woman, who was clutching something, fell violently against the wall. She cried out, losing her grip.

Rodrey stared, frozen, as a baby fell from her hold.

The sight was almost too weird to process. He watched a baby in a yellow onesie drop twenty feet toward the dark water. Someone screamed, but otherwise the bodies on the bridge seemed to turn still. He heard a splash – horribly quiet; the high muddy surface *swallowing* the baby – by then he was running. Momentum carried him over and watery cold engulfed him: a shock through his whole body.

His mouth dipped under, tasted brackish water, spat it out.

Not far to the bridge, but he was no swimmer and flapped out an ugly crawl. Friends liked the rope-swing upriver, but the Dart always made him think of pike. Biting fish you could never see beneath. As the arches rose above him like Roman ruins, with screams that almost sounded like the seagulls, he thought how scared the baby must be, alone, having hit the water.

But the baby wasn't there.

He sucked in a breath and then dived under.

Terrifying how fast the sunlight died. How brief the range of his vision. He kicked deeper. Spun around, his arms frantic through the water. It filled with murk. Silt and shadow, riverweeds like dark green fingers. Something brushed his cheek. He flailed; nothing there.

*How can a baby just disappear?*

The pressure, like panic, grew tight around his lungs. Sounds died. The water *thickened*. He began to see things moving in the gloom, things without form. Grey plumes that appeared and vanished. Rodrey watched them with a quiet horror, certain he was going to drown down there. The thought came with a strange apathy.

He chose that moment to look up. Sinking as he was, some light was visible, just. On the surface, shapes were crossing. Four, five, six of them. They moved in a loose triangle. Their legs beneath, pushing them forward.

"Where do you think they go in winter, the ducks?" Haruko asked that first evening in the pub, as she held the dog-eared book carefully in her hands. She looked up at him. "Or maybe they never leave?"

Rodrey watched the ducks above, as strange as the wild forest beasts of his childhood, and he kicked once more, following their passage. Then, out of the gloom, he

saw the baby. It looked tiny. Doll-like in the way it floated, arms apart; its face pinched and pickled in the murk.

His lungs roared in mutiny. But he seized the baby – surprisingly warm against his chest – and pulled with his free arm. Frigid water rushed by. Some forced itself up his nose, into his mouth, and he gagged. Then the pressure broke. Air was burning down his throat and the screams of the world rushed back in.

A dark-haired man was a few feet away, shouting. He coughed river-water, and felt the man take the motionless child from his arm. He almost struggled to keep hold but he hadn't the energy. His head felt light, but when his body allowed, he began to drift toward the side. He pulled himself gracelessly onto the grass and lay on his back a second. Then he got up on his elbows and watched a man giving the baby CPR. A crowd had gathered, but they gave space. From a distance, for the current had carried him downriver, he watched, thinking how the baby felt in his arms: warm despite the cold. Seconds later the baby coughed up. It started wailing. The crowd broke down in relief, people hugging, yelling. But that cry was the only thing Rodrey really heard. It sounded terrified and confused. But very much alive.

His head fell back on the grass. The sun had fallen a little in the sky, but still found a gap through the overhanging trees. As he gasped short, hungry breaths, he thought of Haruko, going home. How she might be watching an in-flight movie, and eating astronaut food, thirty-thousand feet above. Something about that made him smile. Perhaps the sense of a world moving everywhere, continuously; of places he was yet to go, and people he was yet to meet.

Rodrey's feet hung off the island and his ankle dipped into the river. It didn't feel so cold. And though he didn't see it, his heel cast ripples that emanated out across the Dart. They floated over the water like those left behind by the mallard's wings.